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Pentecost 17

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“From Fear to Faith, from Death to Life”

Text: Mark 9:14-29

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

They were failures. They couldn't do it. A father in distress brings his demon-possessed son to them, and they failed. They couldn't cast it out.

They had done so before. Not too long before this, Jesus had sent the disciples out two-by-two, and *specifically with authority over unclean spirits* (Mark 6:7). And they went out and they cast out many demons. Heady days, those. Days that must have filled the disciples with confidence.

But how quickly things change. Now, they failed. They were failures. Had this authority, this power, left them? What were they doing wrong? They must have been uncertain, confused, and maybe a little scared. Scared of the demon. Scared of the crowd that was turning ugly. Especially since Jesus was not with them. *Where was Jesus when you need Him?*

You've know how that is. You've felt that way, too. There are times in your life when things are going well and you're a success and filled with confidence and sure that Jesus is with you. And then there are times like *this . . .* when things have turned, they're not going so well anymore, and you're a failure - or feel like a failure. And fears creep in. And you wonder, what happened? What did I do wrong? And is Jesus not with me anymore? *Where is Jesus when I need Him!?*

Where *was* Jesus anyway, when this was going on? Well, He was with Peter, James, and John. He had taken just those three and gone away, up on a mountain, and showed them His glory when He was transfigured before them - remember that story? Jesus shone like the sun and was speaking with Moses and Elijah. It's quite a contrast, isn't it? A glorious scene going on up there, and an ugly scene going on down here . . . with demons and fighting and confusion.

That's the scene Jesus steps into. Regular Jesus, not glory Jesus. And after a few questions, **He brings order out of chaos**. Just as in the beginning, when God spoke and brought order out of the chaos in creation, so here the Word of God made flesh speaks, and brings order out of chaos. There is peace, not confusion. There is life, not death. A

happy ending, we might say. But it wasn't easy . . .

And not just for this poor boy who was being tormented by a demon, but for his father. It's hard when suffering comes upon you; it's even harder to watch someone you love suffer. And especially your child. You're the parent, the protector, the provider, and you feel so helpless. And maybe guilty, or at least distressed, when you can't do anything about it. So this father turns to Jesus. He's desperate. Please, ***if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.*** Notice: us. Not just my son. Us. This is tearing him up, too.

***If you can*** . . . Jesus responds to that. It's a *mild* rebuke, really. For the father doesn't really know who Jesus is, the almighty, creator God in human flesh. Somebody powerful? *Yes*. A miracle worker? *Surely*. A prophet? *Probably*. That's why he brought his son to the disciples in the first place. So don't be too hard on him. Jesus wasn't. This father knows and he doesn't know. He's hopeful, but not sure. He really doesn't know what's going on! All he knows is that this is his son! And his son needs help! Rescue! Lord, ***I believe; help my unbelief!*** Don't just save my son; save me, too.

And Jesus does. Both the boy and his father are set free and given life again. The boy set free from his demon, and the father set free from his confusion and fear.

And then Jesus deals with His disciples. They, too, need help. The fighting and chaos were done, but their fear and failure remained. ***Why couldn't we cast it out?*** And Jesus responds: ***This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer.*** Which I don't think means this was some kind of super demon! But more like Jesus asking them: *Why didn't you pray? Why didn't you ask for help?* And then right after this, as Jesus moves on with all twelve of His disciples, **Jesus speaks about the cross.** That *the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise.* But, Mark tell us, *they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.* They still don't ask. They still have fear. They still are confused. They are, in a way, just like that father. They could each say, too: Lord, ***I believe; help my unbelief!***

Which really is a perfect summary of our life as Christians, isn't it? We are saint and sinner, believer and unbeliever, confident and fearful, strong and weak, certain and doubting, all at the same time! At least I see that in me! I suspect you, too. And how often we feel that we've failed. That we are failures. As fathers and mothers, as children, as disciples and Christians. We've sinned. We've fallen short. We've made a mess of things, of life. And we try to do better. Maybe like the disciples, you did in the past. But now . . . And maybe you've wondered a time or two, *Jesus, where are you? Where are you when I need you?* And maybe you, too, have cried out: ***Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*** I can't do this. I need help.

*So where is Jesus?* For you, when you need Him? Well, He's not in His glory someplace far away, like on that mountaintop. He came down to us, just as He came down to that father. He came down to us in our chaos and fears and sins. And He went where He told us He would go - not to Nazareth or Galilee, **but to the cross and the tomb**. For there is where He would deal with our demons. There is where He would deal with our sin and death. And when He rose from death and the grave, **that's where He deals with our unbelief, too**. For the one who rises from the dead has defeated not just death, but our sins and our demons, too. Jesus' empty tomb means that the cross is not defeat, but the means to His victory.

A victory that is given to you in Baptism. That's why in Baptism, just as Jesus rebuked the demon in that son, so, too, here it is said: *Depart unclean spirit, and make way for the Holy Spirit*. And it is so. Another child, or even adult, is set free, by the water and the Word the God which brings order out of chaos, which brings freedom from bondage, which makes a saint out of a sinner, and raises to life from death. I think it's interesting that with the son in our story, the father said that the demon ***often cast him into fire and into water, to destroy him***. But what the devil uses for destruction, God uses to save. Both Jesus' death on a cross, and our being cast into fire and water - the fire of the Spirit and the water of Baptism. **And so this story is our story, too**. The son's deliverance, our deliverance. But our's, even greater. Not just for life here, for a while; but for life everlasting.

But think a little more about this thought for a moment . . . what the devil uses for destruction, God uses to save . . . Could that also be true of other things in your life? Other troubles and trials, other sufferings and challenges? The devil would like to use these things to destroy you, drive you away from Jesus, convince you that: *See? He isn't here for you! He isn't here for you when you need Him!* And the devil can be very persuasive. And we fear and we fight and we get all jumbled up inside and out. But if that, if those very things, cause us to cry out: ***Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*** And they make us pray, and we go back to the Word, and I remember that no matter what the devil says, I am a baptized child of God - not because I deserve it, but because Jesus did it! - and I come to the altar to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus and the forgiveness and strength and saving I need . . . then what the devil uses for destruction, God has used to save us. And if you think the disciples were frustrated that day, and the father was frustrated that day, think how frustrating this is for the devil! When your heavenly Father turns the devil's works against him.

And then your heavenly Father may lay crosses on you, too. Not to hurt or harm you, but to save you. That you not rely on yourself, but turn to Him. And find your hope and confidence and strength not in yourself, but in the empty tomb. Now it is true what the psalmist say: *Weeping may [remain] for the night, but joy comes with the morning* (Psalm 30:5). And if you are in the night of weeping right now, that's not an easy place to be! Just as it wasn't for the father in our story. But Jesus is coming. And not just on the Last Day,

but even now, here, for you. To forgive you, comfort you, provide for you, and save you.

So as we sang in the Introit earlier, ***Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord!*** But the waiting can be the hardest part. So the Lord has given us a Church to help us, and fellow Christians to help us. Don't try to do it on your own. Pray for your fellow Christians, and ask them to pray for you. When you look at this Font, remember here your Saviour came to you and bound Himself to you and said: *You are mine!* Hear the great stories of all that He has done, and His death and resurrection for you, His victory for you, and His promises for you. And when you come to this Altar, as saint and sinner, believer and unbeliever, confident and fearful, strong and weak, certain and doubting, all at the same time - pray those words of the father in our story: ***Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*** And then hear Jesus speak to you: *take eat, this is My Body; take and drink, this is My Blood.* Here is my strength, here is my forgiveness, **for you.** You are free. Go in peace.

And while, yes, *weeping may [remain] for the night*, the joy of the morning of the resurrection is coming. And that morning has already begun to dawn. Things may look dark now, but it's always darkest before the dawn, isn't that what they say? I don't know if that's true in general, but it is for us as Christians. We live in a very dark world, but the Son rose, and is rising upon us, until the day the darkness is no more, and there is only light. And though the night be long and the darkness deep,

*we Praise the One Who Breaks the Darkness!*

*[We] praise the Word Incarnate,*

*Christ, who suffered in our place.*

*For Jesus died and rose victorious*

*That we may know God by grace.*

*[So we] sing for joy and gladness,*

*Seeing what our God has done;*

*[We] praise the true Redeemer,*

*. . . the One who makes us one (LSB #849 vs, 1, 3).*

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.